

Healing Internalized Racism to Succeed in Practice

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Practicing as a naturopathic doctor (ND) who is a person of colour comes with some unique challenges. This is a topic that I've spoken about with other BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and people of colour) NDs over the past couple of years. For many of us, we were minorities in our class at the Canadian College of Naturopathic Medicine and that feeling of being a visible minority continued as we started to practice. Being one of the few people of colour in the room can be an uncomfortable experience that can impact your confidence in many ways.

You may feel, in this situation, the need to prove that you're just as relatable, likable and capable as everyone else. Feeling "different" has a strong effect on the mind and can lead to anxiety about one's ability to succeed in many areas of life—career included. When I started my practice, I worked in a town that, at the time, was not particularly diverse. I remember wondering whether patients would be less likely to book with me because I didn't have a western last name. Would patients prefer to work with someone who shares the same ethnicity? Should I downplay my culture to try to blend in more? Are these concerns warranted based on facts or are they just in my head?

After having many conversations with other BIPOC healthcare providers, I learned that I was not alone in having these concerns. These small moments of solidarity with my colleagues inspired me to write about this issue candidly. I hope that I can be a source of comfort for other NDs who have experienced some of these challenges and that I can make others feel less isolated.

When I started my practice, in 2017, I always had a little stage fright before seeing patients, but I never knew why. Then one day, the reason became clear to me. I had been invited to give a talk, something I normally dread and get very nervous about. The talk was to be held at a dance studio that, as I soon discovered, put a strong emphasis on multiculturalism. I walked in, full of my usual public speaking nervousness, but as I walked through the doors and saw that most of the members were people of colour, my anxiety melted away. For the first time, I did not feel nervous talking about naturopathic medicine in front of a crowd. It was a pivotal moment for me that made me realize that my anxiety around practicing as a naturopathic doctor in various settings may have something to do with being a visible minority.

From that moment, I began a journey of learning about the ways race, racism, and intergenerational trauma shape the mind and the lens through which we see the world. I sought out professional help from a therapist to work through these issues and the results were life-changing.

The sad reality is that it's a common experience for people of colour to feel out of place, even if they were born and raised in that same place. Nobody ever explicitly told me that they think I'm less capable or likable because of my race. But what I learned from my work with a professional is that there is such a thing as internalized racism and this can take a huge toll on your self-perception.

Physician and epidemiologist Camara Phyllis Jones¹ put forth a moving definition of internalized racism as "acceptance by members of the stigmatized races of negative messages about their own abilities and intrinsic worth.... It involves accepting limitations to one's own full humanity, including one's spectrum of dreams, one's right to self-determination, and one's range of allowable self-expression." Research has demonstrated a link between internalized racism, anxiety, and career aspirations.² Learning about internalized racism helped me put my anxiety around practicing into context.

The stories of explicit racism experienced by my parents that they passed on to me made me fear that I had less value than people from the dominant culture. It didn't help that during my formative years in the 1990s and early 2000s, my people and other people of colour were rarely the smart, cool, main characters in the media. We were often the butt of jokes or an unimportant supporting character added for diversity points. I felt like my last name, my Indian appearance, and my unique cultural background were genuinely inferior. That inferiority complex impacted my confidence in all areas of my life, including my career. Internalized racism undermined my confidence in my ability to build a strong practice because I worried that others would see me as "less than."

As Jones points out, internalized racism is linked to explicit and systemic racism, both of which need to be rooted out for internalized racism to truly dissipate.¹ Working on changing peoples' racial biases is fundamental. There has been a growing focus on anti-racism efforts that tackle this. However, it's important for

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BIPOC individuals to remember that we can work on broader systemic issues while also working on healing the internal damage that has already been done. It does not have to be “either, or.”

Over time, with help and through extensive self-work, I began to accept that I deserve to take up space in this profession. I learned to celebrate my heritage more openly rather than hide it. I began to internalize a new reality—that successful NDs can come from many different backgrounds. I began to follow others in the health and wellness space who are people of colour and who are thriving in their work to remind myself of this fact. The pool to draw inspiration from is smaller in the naturopathic profession because the profession is not as diverse as it could be, but that is changing. I now approach my practice with much more confidence, and I see that reflected back, with a busier practice and stronger connections with my patients. Most of the time, I feel that confidence regardless of who is in the room with me. The inferiority complex I had has been healed dramatically and is not holding me back in my career the way it used to.

If anyone reading this article suspects that they are dealing with internalized racism, it’s helpful to learn more about the topic and how it can impact your mindset and confidence. Knowledge is power, and learning more about internalized racism can help you recognize it and address it. It may even be worth getting professional help if you feel that issues around race and internalized racism are holding you back from reaching your full potential in practice.

It’s also helpful to surround yourself with others who can relate to your experiences and provide support. Research has shown that such safe spaces play an important role in healing internalized racism.^{3,4} This is the main reason why some colleagues and I formed a group of BIPOC NDs who meet virtually, every month, to talk about these issues. We provide support and encouragement as well as a safe space to discuss our experiences. Our group is called Gather and Ground and is a subgroup within a larger group called Naturopathic Doctors Dismantling Racism.

I hope this article makes anyone who has experienced or is experiencing internalized racism feel less alone. I hope to make BIPOC NDs aware that there is a network of colleagues whom you can lean on. I also encourage anyone who recognizes and relates to what was shared here to reflect on how racism and internalized racism may be influencing your confidence in yourself and your ability to succeed in practice. Learn more about this topic and seek help so that you can take steps towards building a thriving practice and career that you’re proud of. My hope is that any BIPOC ND who is struggling with internalized racism can heal enough to feel that they deserve to take up space in this profession and reach for the stars.

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